LBJ's Intellectual Jibes at Intellectuals

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What strikes John P. Roche after two years as mustachioed resident intellectual at the White House is "the irrelevance of history" in the making of great decisions.

Bereft of his mustache, Roche held forth before the American Political Science Association yesterday with a medley of impressions that, as panel chairman James MacGregor Burns remarked, would probably have gotten him the bum's rush at a convention of historians.

Unruffled, Roche, who has made something of a career of bringing his fellow intellectuals up short, summed up his stewardship as special consultant to the President with characteristic flair.

"The hell of it is," he said, "that the problem (on any given day at the White House) isn't intellectual" a all.

Intellectual Approach Futile

This, suggested Roche, who is leaving the White House nex week to return to his professorship of history and politics at Brandeis University, is as it should be in a world where quick decisions are constantly required. In the crunch of world crisis, he implied, the "intellectual" approach simply doesn't work.

Salting his talk with examples, Roche recalled last year's crisis over the Arab-Israeli war.

President Johnson, Roche said, asked his advisers what should be done and "one or two incautious members" launched into a dissertation on the history of the Middle East.

The President, by Roche's account, listened patiently but finally interrupted one scholarly observation by demanding: "Therefore? . . . Therefore what?"

"Suddenly," Roche said, "all the history in the world doesn't make the slightest bit of difference."

Fast Answers Needed

In the Middle Eastern crisis, he said, the real question was what to do if Russia "decided to bail out its (Arab) clients. These questions have to be answered fast and they have to be answered yes or no."

Indeed, Roche said, presidential decision-making, no matter how carefully approached, is necessarily an imperfect process based "if you're lucky, on 51 per cent of the evidence."

In the process, he suggested, common sense is often the best guide and lawyers, not scholars, are the best kind of "intellectuals" to have around.

Not a few of Roche's listeners were somewhat chagrined at the various claims. His forum, after all, was a panel discussion on the role of intellectuals in White House policy-making.

"Lawyers are the worst sinners in lack of historical knowledge," declared fellow-panelist Henry Kissinger of Harvard University, a sometime presidential consultant in other administrations. "A sense of history is extremely important."

Too often in government, Kissinger said, "history begins on the day the policy-maker first addressed himself to the problem."

Insisted Roche, who said he based the observation on his two years' "up tight with power" that the press and the "piranha fish" in Congress were constantly finding fault with:

"The American people really have a better Government than they deserve."

Of his own role in the making of crucial decisions, he confessed: "The fact is that I was terrified."